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ABSTRACT

The Student Opinion Survey was sent to a random sample of 2,600 Open University (OU) students who had gained at least two credits and were studying during 1984. The response rate was 84 percent. Responses to open-ended questions on about one-third of those questionnaires were analyzed to determine the significant phenomena in students' experiences of OU study. The subject that most occupied students' minds was tutors and tutorials. Well over one-third mentioned that the decrease in the number of tutors and the inaccessible locations of tutorials had hindered them. Students indicated that the quality of tutors varied from excellent to appalling; the quality of OU material compared very favorably with other academic institutions; and OU study had contributed to their change and development. Most comments about assessment were in the form of suggestions for change. The major concern regarding courses was the number that had been dropped from OU's offerings or postponed. Criticisms about books were that there were too many, they were too expensive, or they were not relevant. Criticisms about administration included increased fees and poor course guides. The critical feedback about summer schools focused on poor quality, expense, disruption to family arrangements, and the fact that they were not optional. Students suggested that OU might economize by scrapping television and radio. (YLB)

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STUDENT RESEARCH CENTRE

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Report No. 2

THE ROUGH AND THE SMOOTH - STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF O.U. STUDY

Robin Mason with Alistair Morgan

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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THE ROUGH AND THE SMOOTH - STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF O.U. STUDY

Open-ended feedback from the Student Opinion Survey

The "PETE DAVEY SURVEY"

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The STUDENT RESEARCH CENTRE was set up within the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology at the beginning of 1986. It brought together staff previously involved in the Student Learning and Development Programme and in the Information and Intelligence Centre. The Student Research Centre's work is concerned with research into and evaluation of all aspects of student learning, focussing particularly on those aspects resulting from the distance learning situation of Open University students.

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THE ROUGH AND THE SMOOTH - STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF STUDY*

1. Introduction

The Students Opinion Survey conducted by Pete Davey for the Student Learning and Development Programme in January 1985, offered students several opportunities to respond to open-ended questions in addition to the pre-coded questions. Students were asked "Are there any things that the O.U. has added/changed/taken away in the years you have been studying with it that have significantly helped or hindered you in your studies?" At the end of the questionnaire they were asked "Have you any other comments which might help us, either about your style of studying, or about how the O.U. might better use its (limited') resources?"

The questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 2,600 students who had gained at least 2 credits and were studying during 1984. Hence students in the sample had quite considerable experience of O.U. upon which to reflect about changes in teaching and learning provision. The response rate was 84%.

This report is based on an analysis of about one-third of the returned questionnaires. The author has read and re-read students' responses so as to "immerse" herself in the data and to draw out what appear to be the "significant phenomena" in students' experiences of O.U. study. The data have been grouped under seven main areas of concern and in each area both mainstream student opinions and also individual unique perspectives are reported.

This report contributes to our knowledge base of students' perceptions of aspects of our teaching and learning provision and how changes in these have impacted on students.

Footnote

* The authors wish to thank members of the Student Learning and Development Programme, particularly Alan Woodley and Malcolm Parlett for their detailed comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

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2. Tutors and Tutorials

The subject which most occupied students' minds was that of tutors and/or tutorials. When asked what changes within the O.U. had hindered them, well over one third of the students mentioned the drop in tutorial provision and the inaccessible locations of tutorials. "I feel tutorials are important but the distance to travel is impossible" is a common cry from students. As tutorials are an important aspect of belonging to the university, their reduction is keenly felt by the main body of students who want more than a correspondence course from their university experience.

> "As tutorials are now too far away, I feel cut off from stimulation and competition of other students"

This feeling is shared by students with a wide range of background and experience, though for different reasons:

> "For some, the material is easy to grasp; for others such as myself, with no education after age 15, the tutorial provision is not sufficient"
>
> "My initial enthusiasm and resolution are inevitably beginning to fade a bit - some extra tutorial help would be a great boost"
>
> "It is an appalling error of judgement to reduce tutor-student contact"
>
> "Tutorials are invaluable for clarifying ideas and as ground for new ideas."

Students on low-population courses particularly, complained of isolation and a good number of them called for more tutorials.

One student type within the university is 'the loner'. Such students pride themselves of their ability to work it all out on their own. For them, tutorials are a waste of time.

Two of the more outspoken loners said:

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"Contact with tutors and fellow students can only be a poor copy of conventional universities, so why try"

"Stop trying to be something it isn't and concentrate on good correspondence material."

The quality of tutors, their value and their services, was equally a subject of much comment. It was commonly held that "the O.U. should investigate the standard and the service offered by tutors". A number of students made the same suggestions:

"The O.U. should weed out some of the more hopeless tutors".

"The O.U. should run student surveys of tutors to ensure good standards".

The cause of these requests is that, as many students pointed out, "the standard of tutors varies from excellent to appalling". One student enquired: "I had a dreadful tutor last year and several of us complained - does anything happen about such people?" More than one student wanted a firmer hand from tutors in dealing with "tutorial hogs".

"The time and expense to get there is wasted when loose ideas are bandied about by the few egotists who appear on every course".

There were no doubts about the value of a good tutor:

"The quality of tutoring is the thing which revitalizes interest when one is sinking."

"I dropped courses twice because of the lack of help/direction from course tutor."

"I failed the course in which the tutor was least accessible".

"An enthusiastic tutor makes all the difference."

However there were definite signs that undesirable changes in the quality of tutoring were appearing. Quite a number of students said something similar to the following:

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"It would appear that the staff are lacking confidence due to savage cutbacks".

"Tutors are becoming more idiosyncratic; now you have to write to please them."

"Don't run down the regional staff - human contact is essential."

At the end of the questionnaire students were invited to make suggestions about how the O.U. might better use its limited resources. Suggestions relating to tutors and tutorials are listed below:

- rotate the location of tutoirals in an area to be more fair
- scrap post foundation course counselling
- tutors could advise what to prepare for tutorials
- hold tutorials in people's homes - better atmosphere, save money
- could tutors make available a couple of hours per week when students are welcome to telephone for advice.

One of the most repeated suggestions (from over 20 students) was that there should be more encouragement from tutors and counsellors in setting up self-help groups. Some students simply wanted a list of names and addresses in their areas; others hoped that tutors might take the initiative in contacting students and even attend the initial meeting.

3. The Open University as an Institution

This group of comments reflects both the range and the depth of feeling about the O.U. and its impact on people's lives. The quality of O.U. material is compared very favourably with other academic institutions by a number of students:

"O.U. material is much better than conventional university publications."

"Referring to other textbooks highlights the superiority of the O.U's teaching material."

"The material and tuition is better than the college and poly previously attended"

One student was delighted with his employer's response regarding the value of O.U. study: "an O.U. degree is probably worth more than an ordinary degree

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because it shows determination, persistence and ability to use spare time". Many students were outraged at government attempts to cut back support from an institution which offers such good value for money both to the government and the student.

Various students attempted to pinpoint what the unviersity's priorities should be:

> "Whatever else has to go (T.V., summer schools), the very high standard of course material should remain top priority."
>
> "Second to the course materials is retaining the number of TMAs and keeping face to face tutorials."

One student felt that the acid test for the O.U. is how its remote students get on. As if in reply a remote student answered, "The assistance, service and course material provided is second to none". Unfortunately this comment stood on its own amongst much criticism from isolated students; for example:

> "Cutting down on tutorials, especially in remote areas and expecting self-help groups to work is unreasonable."

The impact of the O.U. on people's lives goes well beyond the purely academic. Many students' replies clearly indicated how O.U. study had contributed to their change and development as people:

> "I find life with the O.U. exciting and compulsive - impossible to do without, changed my life."
>
> "I couldn't live without the O.U. It has widened my horizons beyond anything I had imagined."
>
> "I am unemployed - the O.U. gave me something to do with my life and hope for the future."
>
> "Studying with the O.U. has been life enhancing - excellent therapy for a geriatric."

Many students spoke of the great pleasure their studying had given them; one of these went on to say, "I probably would have gone under without it". A couple of students did report on the intellectual influence of their O.U. experience:

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"My degree has given me confidence to read books I would have just groaned at before."

"My approach has become more organized over the years and I am more addicted to learning for its own sake."

The feedback also contained a remarkably wide range of reports on 'why the O.U. works well for me'. For all its bureaucracy the O.U. has at the core of its structure, the flexibility to fill the needs of people with very diverse aims, attitudes and backgrounds.

"The O.U. has managed in a remarkable way to give people like me who already have advanced qualifications the opportunity to pursue interests not covered by the fixed structure of higher education."

"A unique opportunity to study in a structured, logical system as a mature student."

"The method of presentation of courses is ideally suited to my lifestyle and study patterns."

"I like the O.U. emphasis on understanding not swotting."

"Lovely to be back with enthusiastic, mature students after taking a break with the O.U. to do a degree at London University."

"My motivation has changed from purely career advancement to studying for its own sake."

"The system of flexibility within a rigid framework is very suitable, both to the dedicated swot and the procrastinator."

"I don't need a 'social life' from the O.U. - all I want is the information."

"I am the kind of person who enjoys doing 20 things at once - O.U. suits me as I can fit it in any time of the day or night."

"The O.U. has offered me a much broader base than a full time degree and I could pursue my career at the same time - I am thus much farther ahead because of the O.U."

These questions clearly demonstrate how students interact with the O.U. so as to fulfill their various needs.

4. Tutor-Marked Assignments and Examinations

Most of the comments about assesment were in the form of suggestions for change. However, some changes which have already taken place were noted

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appreciatively by large numbers of students. By a ratio of 10 to 1, students said that the 100% assessment rules on TMAs had helped, rather than hindered them. Similarly, the facility for providing CMA feedback was voted the third most useful change (after the use of cassettes and videos and the reduction in superflous O.U. material through the post')

Although only one student suggested a change in weighting to CMA/TMA results rather than final exams, quite a few students commented sadly that they did very well on TMAs but very badly on final exams. Some of them blamed nerves and exam phobia, but many had no idea why they had received such low marks. These and other students put in requests for feedback on exams e.g. their marks on each section; model/right answers. Two other common pleas were for an extra, free 20 mins. to read the questions on exams, and for a longer space between the end of units and the beginning of exams.

The importance of TMAs to students is a common theme emerging in different ways throughout the feedback.

"TMAs and CMAs are the most important part of my studies"
was often stated. TMAs seen by some students as the main focus of their attention, both by those whose primary motivation was getting good marks, but also by those who found that working on TMAs produced the most lasting learning opportunities. Tutor comments on TMAs formed one of the major connecting links for students who need 'human contact' as part of their learning experience. The two major suggestions from students regarding TMAs are an obvious consequence of their importance to students

(i) the provision of model answers for TMAs and
(ii) a faster return of TMAs.

5. The Course Provision

The major concern of students regarding courses was the number of them which had been dropped from the University's profile, postponed etc. The lack of choice, the difficulties in planning a degree profile, and the inadequate provision in some areas were mentioned repeatedly. These formed the third most frequently reported hinderance, (after lack of tutorials and increases in fees) caused by the cuts in O.U. provision.

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"More science courses - especially at third level - there is virtually no choice at present."

"The number of Arts courses is dropping - very difficult to plan an Arts degree."

"The number of pure science courses - especially biology has been cut."

"Cutting down the variety of courses offered cuts down the value of an O.U. degree."

"There should be more full credit courses."

There were various criticisms about the use of set books on courses. Many students didn't like them, because there were often too many, or they were too expensive or not really relevant. There were some suggestions to make them optional and also contrasts made to the units.

"The units are a much better teaching aid than the set books."

The small group of students who preferred to study in large uninterrupted spans of time, made their contribution to this survey, by calling for a reduction in the need for constant switching from units to set books, supplementary material, handbooks, project manuals etc. Also some students request more self contained courses in order that they can study 'on the move' (e.g. on the train or at work). There were also the familiar requests for more summaries and indices.

From the students who want less "spoon-feeding" came demands for greater autonomy in their study:

"I feel we are made to keep to the Units too much - little scope for own research."

"There should be more choice on third level essays to allow for individual interests."

"How about more courses pitched at students of high academic ability with more opportunity to express themselves."

Suggestions about what sorts of courses the O.U. should offer were of course numerous, but one element was frequently repeated - students want courses which appear relevant to employers e.g. technology, engineering, computer courses.

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"Try to meet the demand - e.g. there is a waiting list for TM222."

"An honours degree in Maths/Technology should be a BSc not a BA."

"Keep political bias out of courses."

"More courses in the fast moving technologies such as, fibre optics, genetic engineering, and updated computer languages."

6. Administration

Various administrative matters were aired in the comments, not the least of which was the increase in fees. After the reduction in tutorials, this was the second most frequently mentioned change in the O.U. system which had hindered students.

"Courses are good value for money but I still couldn't afford them without 80% assistance by employer (Civil Service)."

However the payment by instalment plan was definetely a mitigating factor and came fifth in the list of changes which have helped students.

"I just managed to afford my final course by instalment paying and borrowing library books."

The amount of material coming through the post from the O.U. is also a subject of concern to students. Indeed the third most helpful change as perceived by them, was a reduction in superflous material sent by the O.U. e.g. less form filling required and fewer papers to read. However, in the open-ended section where students had the opportunity to make comments on any O.U. topics, many said versions of the following:

"The amount of paperwork sent to students has been cut, but there is still far too much."

"I sometimes receive mailings within a few days of each other - this is very wasteful."

Still on the topic of mailings, there were many students who favoured a single mailing of the whole course:

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"I would like one mailing of all material at the end of January, to get an overview of the course and to be able to work at my own speed."

In terms of economy in mailings, a number of students pointed out less than tactfully that a reduction in misprints and errata would reduce costs all round. One student wondered why it was necessary to send everyone the first block of their alternative course choice. Another wondered whether two O.U. students in the same household could be sent single, rather than duplicate mailings of Sesame, handbooks, etc.

The course guides came in for a certain amount of criticism. Some students thought that they did not provide sufficiently accurate information. For example:

"The study guide read like a holiday brochure - everything appeared appealing and straightforward."

"We want <u>far more</u> information about courses before starting them."

The students who commented on the subject felt that greater effort should go into getting things right <u>before</u> they start a course e.g. in good pre-counselling for potential students, and accurate, not glossy descriptions of courses. Many students felt that post-foundation course counselling was a poor use of precious resources and should be scrapped.

The theme of belonging, of being "connected" to the University was again evident in the following remarks.

"Sesame gives me a feeling of belonging and being in touch - keep it at all costs."

"Please retain regaional offices - it is too easy to get lost in the maze of Walton Hall."

"The high quality of units - the print and presentation - is a motivating and supportive factor. If you care, we care."

A few students said it would be very helpful in their circumstances if they could have the option of spreading a full credit over two years. In the same vein, others requested the option of carrying over TMA marks earned one year

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to the next, if it were necessary to withdraw the first time. Still others wondered why they must wait a whole year for a resit.

There were a great number of suggestions from students on administrative matters which are included here partly because some might be of interest and partly because they do reflect students' thinking. The request, perhaps something of an "old chestnut", for a one or two week break somewhere along the course for reflection, catching up, summer holiday etc., appeared in students' responses. As one student explained:

> "The need to hurry and skip certain parts of the units takes away much of the enjoyment."

There were a number of suggestions regarding computer access:

> "Expand the use of O.U. computing service for tutorials with access to the system by home computer."
>
> "More care must be taken over times of accessibility of computer terminals."

Other suggestions students offered were as follows:

> "Make old exam papers available for purchase."
>
> "Negotiate special rental rates on video equipment with sympathetic firms for students."
>
> "What about a register of O.U. graduates seeking employment - employers need to be made more aware of the quality and value of O.U. degrees and of the personal attributes of O.U. graduates."
>
> "Produce looseleaf units, then pages requiring amendments could easily be issued."
>
> "How about a colour code for correspondence to indicate urgency of response."
>
> "Disappearance of courses is upsetting - could they be available without tuition, broadcast etc., for the really dedicated."

7. Summer Schools

The feedback about Summer Schools from this survey was on the whole, critical. This can be partly explained by the fact that the open-ended question did

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invite students to suggest ways in which the University might use its limited resources more efficiently. Hence any aspect of the O.U. and its courses which a student doesn't particularly like, or use, is a likely area for suggested reduction. Consequently, the "scrap Summer Schools brigade" is perhaps overly represented in this feedback. The criticisms of Summer School fell roughly into four categories:

(i) the most serious was that it was ineffective, irrelevant, "poor quality"

"it was enjoyable, but not relevant enough to the course".

(ii) it was expensive

"Summer School is compulsory on the course I want to take, but I can't afford it."

(iii) disruption to family arrangements

This group was approximately the same size as the first category and consisted of those who found domestic arrangements difficult e.g. holidays, baby sitting and those who found the social side of Summer School objectionable

"the unsavoury reputation does nothing for the O.U. reputation or for feelings of wives/husbands left at home."

"I resent having to be away from home at night."

(iv) Summer School should be optional

This was the largest group of all

"Summer Schools make courses impossible for some people."

"make post foundation course S.S. optional" and

similarly "why not optional Summer Schools in courses without them at present".

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Related to the idea of optional Summer Schools, was the alternative suggestion offered by many students - more weekend schools (and less frequently) more day schools instead -

> "More weekend schools instead of tutorials and Summer School for people in remote areas."
>
> "weekend schools are so much easier to arrange."

Of course the 'Summer School is great' contigent was represented, though not as strongly as might have been expected (from other surveys). Here again the theme of "belonging" shows itself.

> "the companionship and exchange of ideas at Summer School is an important part of the O.U."
>
> "cutting down on S.S. is a real loss - it is the only 'real' environment available to O.U. students."
>
> "Summer School is more beneficial than any other single element offered by the O.U."

The role of dialogue available at Summer School can provide a unique contribution to helping students develop as learners.

> "I avoid telephone tutorials as I am scared of voicing my thoughts and opinions, though Summer School has helped me to get over these inhibitions."

8. Television and Radio

As with summer schools, the nature of the questions asked of students is likely to elicit a critical response, if a particular aspect of course provision was not liked or used. So, in relation to television, in suggesting how the university might economise, many students recommended that television and radio be scrapped, (and usually that the savings be put to increasing tutorials).

> "O.U. programmes on T.V. and radio may advertise the O.U. but they don't help the students much."
>
> "I dutifully watch every programme but I never find them useful."

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"The expenditure is out of balance with the benefits."

Some students did suggest merely cutting down the number of programmes while others said, "make them more relevant or cut them out". It is important to add here that the most frequently mentioned helpful change in the O.U. system was the introduction of audio cassettes (and to a lesser extent) video cassettes. On the other hand, inconvenient broadcast times and lack of repeats were significant changes which had hindered students. So, the inconvenience of the broadcasting system, may account for some of the antagonism to television and radio.

A small group, however, did object to the actual content of the programmes:

"Some are like Play School with tutors talking slowly and patronisingly."

"The arts programmes are too general."

"Many programmes lack relevance to the course."

9. Conclusions

This analysis of answers to open-ended questions contributes to our understanding of the realities of being an O.U. student and trying to cope with its various demands. It shows clearly how students value regional academic support, particularly face to face tuition.

These responses indicate how students interact with both the course components as well as the institution. They provide us with insights into the human dimension of O.U. study, the dimension beyond that concerned with transmitting and receiving information. Students can be seen to 'connect' with particular parts of the system which meet their prefered patterns of study. The concept of "connectedness" gives a broad theoretical concept for understanding how students make sense of their university experience. It also draws out attention to how students value diversity in our course provision so as to foster "quality" in their learning. Understanding the value of this diversity from the students' perspective is of particular importance during a period of financial constraint, when decisions regarding our teaching and learning provision are likely to result in a reduction of this diversity.

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Reports of the Student Research Centre

Copies of SRC reports are available from the Centre on request

No.1 Effective Study in the Open University : The Human Dimension
Mary Thorpe, *et al* (February 1986)
Published as 'The Human Dimension in Open University Study'
in Open Learning Vol.1, No.2 (1986)

No.2 The Rough and the Smooth - Students' Experiences of O.U. Study
Robin Mason with Alistair Morgan (January 1986)

No.3 Reactions of Part-time Tutors to Financial Cuts in the Open University
Reg Melton, *et al* (February 1986)
Published as 'Are Our Tutors Satisfied?'
in Open Learning Vol.1, No.2 (1986)

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